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SUBJECT: SEVENTH DAY ADVENTISTS CELEBRATE FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY

¶1. (U) Summary: Religious leaders and officials gathered at the Seventh Day Adventist's main HCMC church on October 23 to celebrate the denomination's first General Assembly since it became nationally registered in December 2006. Government leaders praised the church's moral and humanitarian message while foreign representatives focused on the church's global mission. End summary.

Officials Praise Protestant Values

¶2. (U) National Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) Deputy Director Nguyen Thanh Xuan, HCMC CRA Director Huynh Ngoc Thanh, HCMC Fatherland Front Vice President Tran Trung Tin, and Communist Party Propaganda Section Deputy Director Tran Ngoc Bao were among the GVN leaders present at the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) General Assembly. National and HCMC Ministry of Public Security Officials and several provincial CRA representatives also attended, and the church received a congratulatory letter from President Nguyen Minh Triet.

¶3. (SBU) CRA Deputy Director Xuan reviewed the statistics proving a productive relationship between CRA and Protestant groups in recent years, including more than 1,000 registrations nation-wide, the opening of several theological schools and the printing of Bibles in ethnic minority languages. Xuan said 1,200 Protestant congregations are now operating in the Central Highlands "without difficulty" and pledged to continue the CRA's work of "creating favorable conditions for religious activities in Vietnam." He praised Protestants for promoting important values like diligence, thrift, charity and adherence to the law. HCMC CRA Director Thanh also expressed his hope that the Seventh Day Adventists would "follow the Ten Commandments and national laws and regulations."

Adventists Emphasize Worldwide Mission

¶4. (SBU) The SDA's South Asia Pacific Secretary, Rev. Joshua Wone Mok, said Vietnam's recognition of the Seventh Day Adventists and other Protestant groups was in keeping with the country's growing role as a regional and global actor. He noted that Vietnam's Seventh Day Adventists are now part of a global community of 16 million followers in 203 countries. Australian Rev. Ronald Walter said the main mission of the church was non-political and focused on carrying out good works through the denomination's network of hospitals, schools and Adventist Development and Relief Agencies (ADRA). Rev. Walter added that he hoped the SDA's new status in Vietnam would make it easier for the church to acquire additional properties. Coming full circle, Vietnamese American Rev. Le Cong Giao expressed his joy over returning to celebrate the revival of the SDA church after having left during the war.

Historical Note

¶5. (U) The Seventh Day Adventists came to Vietnam in 1916 and established their first church in 1929. They had about 4,500

followers in 1975, but when the war ended most of the SDA's leadership left Vietnam with the exception of ten pastors. 1976-1985 were difficult years for the church and most activities were held in secret, but the church continued to attract new followers. By 1985, they had 10,000 followers with 80 meeting points. Since 2006, they have baptized approximately 400-500 new members annually, and now have six main congregations and 121 meeting points (81 registered) representing 13,397 followers throughout the country. Approximately 74 per cent of the denomination's adherents are ethnic minorities. The General Assembly is usually the last step to take place before a denomination receives national-level recognition.

16. (SBU) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.

FAIRFAX